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DAVID A. SAMUELSON

The Experience of Cinderella

BY COMMON WISDOM "experience" is doing, living, acting, and "reading" means the opposite, temporarily residing in a zone outside of real time and activity. This cliche is honored most by the readers of popular novels for whom mental activity is not an experience. I propose to examine this attitude toward reading and experience with an analysis of mainstream, realistic popular fiction. I especially want to describe the nature of the experience it offers.

Escape is the customary explanation of the experience: we read to remove ourselves from where we are to someplace else. The pages of fiction become a doorway. What is seldom clarified by those who use this term (the culture at large) is who and where we are, in this room, and who and what we become on the far side of the door. It is much more obvious why escapist fiction is so named. It always narrates escape: in the nick of time, at the end, Paul and Della give Perry the answers, Inspector Erskine's helicopters land, Indian maids are untied,—all mythic and serial heroes arise from their imminent ashes to live on for further brushes with obliteration. Transported from an armchair, the reader is lifted into crises like these and is gently, dramatically, returned by these narratives. The quality of this kind of vicarious journey is often visceral (as in the way we tense up for fourth-and-one attempts on the edge of our seat) and describable in terms of sublimation (that numb, drained state at the game clock's last digit). Escape so viewed is a local and transient experience.

Memory often enforces effects of the reading experience that last much longer, when the power of the sublimation has faded, when the boundary that doorway marked has become blurred. For this reason we need another metaphor,—a window, for when we choose to escape into stories of escape, we are choosing to look at the world in a certain way. However frivolous the choice, it entails selective epistemology. The qualities of the vicarious experience in this sense are not merely concerns of depth psychology—they are cognitive transactions. It is less the last minute release from catastrophe that marks escapist fiction than it is the structures we see, recognize, and savor from the very beginning, the peculiar way the content of that vision is delivered. So we may speak of a popular model of what lies beyond the window. Having enjoyed, taught, and studied a good many works of popular fiction, I suspect that what we undergo in the experience of reading big adult escape narratives differs little from our early experiences reading fairy tales, that the worlds modeled by the windows of both kinds of escapist fiction are one and the same. To develop this suspicion I have

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selected two recent popular novels that explicitly invite us to consider their topical content in light of the timeless fairy tales: Barbara Tori's *The Cinderella Factor* (1972) and Irving Wallace's *The Fan Club* (1974). To make my comments coherent, I must indulge in some measure of evocative description.

Let me begin with some cliches in story form. Imagine a large, green shuttered, white frame house. It is dark, 9 PM Friday. Upstairs, Mother sits by their bed, reading to little Cissy and Sam for the twentieth time the story of Cinderella. She spares them Grimm's "Aschenputtle," its morbid vigil at the mother's grave, the blood on the stepsisters' feet, and the birds who peck out their eyes as Aschenputtle rolls down the road in her royal coach at the end. Rags to royalty, scorn to exaltation, it is so pleasing a motion that by the time our new princess is about to forgive her stepsisters and congeal into that smiling happy ever after, Cissy and Sam drift off to their own dreams.

Mother tiptoes out and down the hall, notes the light under Marvin's door. Marvin is eleven, devoted to S.F., and does not concern us yet. By 10 PM, pancaked and propped up on two pillows, Mother sleepily turns the pages of a Barbara Tori novel. She savors the irony, its title is *The Cinderella Factor*, a fairy tale for adults she muses. That "factor" is what the smooth executives at Princess Incorporated, the top cosmetics firm, look for in the ideal model, the Princess who wins their lavish beauty contest. It is an instance of our culture's favorite fairy tale, a variation of the action wherein peasant nobodies become stars, to reinforce and exemplify this very story in further art. No bland and primping vacancies these contestants, and not an ex-majorette in the bunch. Just fifty of the most worldly wise, liberated, and experienced females imaginable. Beautiful, but interesting as well, and for 250 pages we wait at the airport to witness each beauty arrive, each trailing an interesting story: rape, kidnap, authorship. One beauty trails an interesting club foot. Banker, lawyer, race driver, top model, top designer, exotic dancer, they lug their intriguing stories to the chic Baylor hotel, site of the contest, and the story's version of a royal palace. Mother subsides on her pillow, perhaps depressed by the women's liberation daydream come so wildly true. As she dozes off a reverie passes through her head: Inside the plush Baylor! Crammed explosively, fifty witty and knowing beauties. But why do they want to be a Princess? So liberated, some wealthy already, all successful. What is that "factor?" A Princess as model for make-up ads. Dumb? Sex in the hallways, the lid blown off the Baylor and the tiara. That unknown reporter from *Dare* magazine, exposures, revelations, hotel staff all ethnic, swarthy, ex-criminals, cops, peasants for our Princesses. . . .

The phone rings Mother out of her reverie. It is Father, in Los Angeles, calling from the airport to say good night, see you in the morning. In his coat pocket, Irving Wallace's *The Fan Club*, another sexy novel and another version of Cinderella. It is Father's hedge against insomnia on the night flight he is catching two hours later. By the time he buckles into his seat, he has followed Wallace's four modern day peasants as they hatch and execute a plot to kidnap sex symbol film star Sharon Fields. It is a piece of class revenge right out of the basic fairy tale plot: it is also, à la Mission Impossible, a team effort pooling the special talents of a Mechanic, an Insurance Salesman, an Accountant, and a grocery clerk who

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dreams of becoming a Writer. This pattern also echoes Grimm's "Six Soldiers of Fortune," where strong man, runner, blower, marksman, and owner of a magical freezing cap form a team to assist the poor discharged soldier humiliate the King and drain the royal treasury. In *The Fan Club*, however, the royal fortune our peasants lust after is sex, the sublime sex represented by Sharon Fields. She is treasure of a sort usually reserved for the wealthy and the famous, our contemporary royalty, the class with a strangle hold on fortune, beauty, and pleasure. Father doesn't consciously observe how Wallace has inverted the fairy tale, substituting sex for money and status; he does accept the cues of the four peasants he identifies with, as they droolingly wonder "What will it be like?" to know Sharon sexually. But as the exotic possibilities lure him forward, somehow high above Utah he begins to nod. Fatigue, the nature of the bedtime fiction, and my own Puck-like purposes have all collaborated to put our reader to sleep.

The above is a reasonable account of the experience Tori and Wallace promise the reader. From the reported details it should be evident how *The Cinderella Factor* and *The Fan Club* consciously exploit conventional fairy tale matter: specifically, both narratives are adaptations of the most pervasive and popular of all stories, Cinderella. Despite the modern dress and topical concerns, and the evocation of salacious, or at least sensational, scenes to come, the underlying formula is that of the fairy tale: the character of the peasant who becomes royal, devices for a miraculous elevation and subsequently transformed identities, and an end that is happily final. Familiar too are the values issuing from the language of Cinderella and similar tales: love and marriage and riches, forever achieved out of social rising and made possible by the affinity beauty has with goodness. For reflecting these values in their narratives, Tori and Wallace owe a debt not to the tales, but to their residency in western culture, whose traditional form for daydreams and wishful imagining has long been caught, made, or described by these tales and their value systems. Most authors of popular narrative know very well how to trade on this fact, and Tori and Wallace seek to do so openly, with some wit. But it is another, deeper link between fairy tale and popular novel I wish to examine here, a question of root schema and fundamental organization shared by these seemingly disparate narrative types (the short first fictions for children and the innocent parts of us, five page stories making no pretense at all toward mimesis, and the often five hundred page sagas for the comparatively sophisticated reader, books that depend upon the illusion they will unfold some portion of a very real world's hidden truth). I think the root schema is this: the reader's confidence, his firm anticipation, of precisely the kind of experience the narrative will unfold for him. More to the point, the anticipated vicarious experience he firmly trusts not to upset values, beliefs, and tastes—which is to say, he seeks an experience that is no exprience at all.

Surely, "experience" must be italicized. What I mean is that sensation when the mind comes in contact with a world (real or imaginary), when a taste is noted, a perception registered, a texture felt, the sense something has happened to alter one's previous condition. Frequently, images of the new or unknown best characterize the sense of "experience." Curiously, what distinguishes the appeal of popular novels is the very promise to yield this kind of "experience:" the exotic

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made known, the new delivered—tastes, sensations, freedom! My thesis is that far from delivering on these promises, popular novels are popular because of their imposture: they systematically retreat from the new to formulate experience as superficial and tiny and formulaic as that of fairy tales literally read. The disturbing thing about the imposture is that these big books, unlike the tales, rest their official defense upon mimesis. They promise to produce that big real world, to grant us experiences of "the real."

At its most literal, this promise is best exemplified by Arthur Hailey's fiction: his peopled essays on life behind the public facades in airports, big hotels, the auto industry, and Wall Street are overt portraits of backstage surface reality, replete with statistics, sociological critiques and news bulletins. It is a superficial mimesis of numbers and facts. Hailey invites the reader to experience this milieu, gather information, form judgments, and in short, learn how the great system operates—to become an insider. The accuracy of Hailey's facts have been debated, but everyone agrees there are problems with the people in these essays. To wit: the desire to create life in the inner sanctum of the automobile industry, its very importance, leads to a sentence like this: "Beside *Newsweek* on the sofa was *The Wall Street Journal*, a florid middle-aged reporter named Harris" (*Wheels* N.Y., 1971 p. 56). People become the topical ethos they represent: New York versus Detroit, A.P. versus *The Detroit News*, Racing, Design, Labor, entities all celebrated by caps. Hailey's people are flat, dry, official—they lack the very quality Tori and less restrained novelists offer as the chief metaphor for the hidden and most popular reality—sex and passion.

Let us illustrate the fraud with the experience awaiting Mother on another night in Barbara Tori's allegedly realistic fantasy—*The Cinderella Factor*, our fifty witty and worldly beauties, life inside the chic Baylor hotel, *Dare* magazine, and the promised collisions, explosions, sex, and realism. Clearly, Tori lifts the limits of ordinary glimpsing to present this exceptional world. But more curiously, the very strategies that augur the realistic touch are precisely those features that bring on the fullest fantasy. The surface realism, for example, consists of the familiar scenes borrowed from the advertising layouts in the *New Yorker*, littering the atmosphere with fancy labels, fancier price tags, and glamorous objects galore—a litter that pushes characters right off the page. Gestures toward a sociological realism, secondly, amount to a system of characterization which stamps each person according to his work or profession. What is fantastic about such "realism" is not that each person represents a glamorous job—pilot, lawyer, sculptor, author—but that each character *is* his occupational role, exclusively. And, except for the photographers who record this glamorous reality, we see so very little of how one really works. Thus both depth psychology and behavioral analysis are impertinent. As in television soap operas, we have here a version of the pastoral. The window offers a picture of professional roles in off-duty moments manipulating pretty objects, while lounging about in the Baylor. What is life like inside the hotel and cosmetic business? In a way, it is more exciting, glamorous, and dignified even than being in the show out front, the illusion represented by the beauty contest itself. Thus, the model of popular experience is a chamber of commerce fantasy, a celebration of the top portions of the working world, which

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by our culture's mythology we are to aspire to, escaping all below.

But we must locate the most acute fantasy in the characters, for they should know better, with all their experience, than to fall for this fantasy. These liberated beauties who represent a culture's dream of female freedom, freedom from sexual and social stereotypes (the novel is set in an indeterminate future), and freedom from the usual cliches about beauty's mindlessness. But, as they leave the airport and their interesting stories to move into the Baylor, they settle down into snug routines, team up instead of clashing, and sit prettily about like anxious Cinderellas, becoming in every way the silly little girls who normally inhabit beauty contests. Vast narrative possibilities tighten into enclosures, and the Baylor becomes prison-like, holding these girls captive and, while they think of sneaking out at night on a lark, they prize their captivity. Why this transformation? Are we beholding an interesting if sexist cliche, that under the slick veneer of every liberated lady lies a cuddly little girl? Perhaps. But we are also cued to enter deeper, murkier, somehow threatening experiences, as signalled by Tori's shift in underlying fairy tale. From "Cinderella," a pat and unrealistic story, we move to a racier model, "The Beauty and the Beast," a more adult pattern since it treats instead of crowns and vapid princelings (which are not altogether rejected, by the way) a full blown symbol of libidinous sexuality and male mystique, personified by the Baylor Security Chief and ex-cop, Frank Quinn, in whom we are to find our depths. He keeps our girls in their gilded cages, while they are meanwhile enthralled by his sexiness. "Cops are the sexiest men in the country," they all agree. Quinn defines himself this way: "I'm not a realist. I'm a romantic with the heart ripped out of him," making him a tough exterior none of the beauties accept as they try to find the mushy softness inside his "M&M" construction. But while we imagine we are touching volcanic and mysterious depths or insides, all we are permitted to savor of Quinn is his hard (hence colorful) surface. With the shift in the radical metaphor for the novel, to Beauty and the Beast, Quinn takes over stage center, cruises about, doing nothing but exuding rough power, and nearly all the beauties bend their minds to his meaningless movement. The illusion of depth is what permits their fascination.

These girls are supposed to be wise, on to the games of adult reality they always speak of, yet their foremost sign of sophistication comes in their breezy barbs about fairy tales. Here Tori reaches for the illusion of real worldliness by having her lovelies wittily and self-consciously point out again and again that life is no fairy tale, all the while they are unaware how much for them it is. So we hear about Cinderella as a "pink tragedy," for some reason love combined with ambition. Why? Who knows? One of the signs of wit is elusiveness. Quinn joshes, "How did I get elected big bad wolf?" Replies the future princess, "The same way I got to be Little Red Riding Hood." The ex-princess philosophizes: "Beauty and the Beast, they shouldn't tell little girls a story like that. They remember it later, only then beauty is something beastly, and the beast is almost beautiful." Indeed, Quinn's sexual mystique does triumph as beautiful, women do retreat into adolescence, all for the sake of a cute transformation of Cinderella's story about princely redemption into the tale of the Beast's sexual powers; the real prince is the tough libido. Such a transformation reduces, trivializes, and makes

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fantastic what might otherwise have been an interesting and thoughtful narrative, all for the sake of the ostensible realism of rampant sexuality, and the refusal to explore in depth the reason why Quinn resembles a beast.

The Beast selects the next Princess himself, beauties with problems solve them, some by nestling into the employ of the Baylor and the Pageant. We close on a sense of the well knit and tidy family. All in all, Mother can look forward to a comfortable and cozy experience. She is spared or denied much, and the what-might-have-been is all implied in the device of the *Dare* magazine reporter smuggled among the contestants, ever prompting us to wonder about the wondrous realities its final words might expose. *Dare* itself stands for rugged, honest, a bit cynical journalism, and it sets down "reality" upon its pages. *Dare* also suggests all that a thoughtful and daring authorial consciousness could and should have unfolded for us, were the reporter a curious Norman-Mailer-type witness—the odd sweat stain, odder and inappropriate thoughts, some vertigo, some hilarious comedy, and perhaps a meditation on art and reality inherent in the situation where real persons who are beautiful vie to become the ideal form of beauty, the Princess, who will become art in advertising layouts held up as the model other real women should artifice themselves after with Princess cosmetics. But no, Tori and *Dare* have other goals. In the final *Dare* report, which closes the novel, we are treated to a tittering and giggly account of the ordeal of hair-dos, make-up, fittings, nerves, and at the heart of it all, a report on all the white panties and pretty bottoms Frank Quinn beheld as he systematically kisses each contestant good luck. In this final backstage, behind the scenes exposure, where the last word on libidos and mysteries of commercial life is to be said, all we learn is that behinds can be pretty. *Dare* shrivels to *Women's Wear Daily*, and Quinn's kisses kiss good-bye anything remotely real, human, or interesting. Will Mother be disappointed? Probably not, since in our relaxed state of mind, we all prefer our fantasy to follow the Jules Verne fashion, where large premises convert into cozy, compact, and orderly worlds, such as that of the Nautilus. The Baylor becomes Home, the staff of Princess Inc. and the hotel emerge as Family, and like Hans, Gretel, and little Red, no one is lift wandering and footloose by novel's end, each potential displaced person finding his home within this nexus. All the depths we are teased or horrified with (libido, anomie, disillusion) are purified by the whiteness of those panties, transformed to surfaces, and the Beast of the alleged depths, alas, is but a Cop of surface mythology. Admiringly, we savor such surfaces as we beat a retreat to the coziness of this miniature world. We appreciate how Tori shrinks the vastness implied by the far flung reaches of the country our contestants represent, each rooted back home in a potentially messy story. What is actually shrunk and flattened out are the corollaries of this vast scale, the psychological and philosophical fragmentation that would obtain were fifty such characters allowed to escape surfaces, collide, and run loose from the Baylor, into our heads.

In *The Fan Club* mimetic options again turn formulaic, but only after we experience more risk. For one thing, Wallace does not withdraw from the quest of his narrative, the sex that is both magical, equivalent to fairy tale treasure, and realistic, with its blood, bruises, and ecstasy. The four peasants do rape and do experience their dream. A colleague of mine tells a story on himself that is appro-

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priate here: he asserted one day in class that the basic plot design in fiction, the ABC movement up and down Freitag's triangle, is pure form, representing nothing whatsoever in nature: he was brought up short by a student who pointed out that it does: it mimes the movement to and from sexual climax. Wallace builds his novel on this very pattern, and the saga of the dreaming turned into rape climbs up that peak when all four taste the sex symbol in the flesh: the climax is their sexual climaxing. We are surprised: she should have been spared or rescued, but instead, exploiting new liberties in taboos on sexual depiction, Wallace pays off Father's wonder in carnal detail galore, and Father thinks he should be sure to leave the book in the plane, lest it find its way into Marvin's hands at home. There is much more nerve in *The Fan Club* than in Tori's story, for we are seemingly brought to imaginative thresholds, where amoral wish rubs up against moral order. We pass beyond the giggly white panty voyeurism of *The Cinderella Factor*, and almost confront the heart of sexual fantasizing—its mysteries, meanings, and consequences.

But this experience is yet another illusion. Instead of risking all kinds of experimental possibilities, the story tightens into safe and comfortable conventions. First, the rich and wondrous climax, the sex itself, is neatly stylized. Second, in the manner of the tale Chaucer's Pardoner tells, the wide open and wondrous dreaming constricts, and after the climax we have a morality saga: we shift sympathies to Sharon, who turns out to be a self-made Cinderella who kicked and clawed her way to the top, who is still looking for the prince and who is not at all the sweet little sex Princess of her publicity releases. Caring for her, we don't mind as this ultimate "inside plush reality" story turns police procedural and compliment to society: we watch society array its rescue, led on by clever clues of heroine, and watch dreams turn evil, dreamers turn on one another, to die fittingly, as Sharon escapes, at the end. We must not permit our rapist to survive and walk the streets with their delicious memories, at least not if Sharon lives on, and live on she must. Conventional morality, the passing round of just desserts, yes, but also at play here is the social taboo on sexual liberties: not because rape is a crime, but because such privileged tasting is itself too dangerous, an experience demanding death, and hence the necessary closure in punishing the experiencers. The only way out of this dilemma is to make Sharon ordinary in bed, a reality not worth the wonder and the dream, and Wallace can not do this. Let us return to the scene of the crime and see what she *is* like, and how sexual mystique is preserved yet rendered comfortable. I think we have here a principle of certainty: just as in fairy tales, no prince on his wedding day ever turns into a frog, we can rest assured that magic of Sharon's will somehow wind up safe and formulaic, the ultimate ending for the voyeuristic readers. What *is* it like? First, Sharon, the impossible dream, is converted into matter by our dreamers: robbed of mind and memory, as well as allure or distinctive mannerisms; her mystique is deposited in her body, her "gorgeous muff," they call it, which in some strange way, hyperbolically exceeds all others. As "matter," what is she like? Actually, we don't know, for Wallace heeds the pornographic formulas of presenting the male's sexual experience through the recipient's response. The rapists know no sensations, politely living up to the taboo disallowing the male's feeling, for "feeling" effeminates. Well, what does *Sharon*

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feel? Pain, chiefly, and the humiliating ludicrousness of it all, for were she to know any kind of pleasure, another taboo goes crashing. Mostly her experience is dismal or nonexistent. Thus both the rapists and their victim experience none of the sensations they risk their necks to give us, all the possibilities behind our culture's obsession with sexual wonder. In the model of popular experience, sex is the provocative equivalent to the wild notions of possibility keyed by the fairy tale's formulated opening, "es war einmal," once upon a time. Sex is royalty achieved. Sex is reality, too. Yet, if narrative pattern in the tale ensures that that stranger on the path be no casual encounter, that our peasant adventurer, usually the dumbest and luckiest of fellows, will heed the stranger's enigmatic instructions, and for his trust be rewarded, if formula guarantees that the prince each time choose dusty Cinderella, that riddles and gifts bear consequences—in *The Fan Club* and most popular novels, social convention and taboo systems carry a similar force: they ensure that surprise collapse into certain orthodoxy, and that sexual experience itself (sex as synecdoche for experience and reality) not be experienced.

Fortunately, we enjoy a single exception to this pattern, yet a curious case. The one time Sharon knows pleasure is also the single instance a male's sensations *are* recorded: it is achieved by the inventor of the kidnap plot, our dreamer, the writer (an authorial surrogate?), the fairy tale poor peasant figure Wallace italicizes as the one "least likely to succeed." Sharon is allowed to feel here because she is just once helplessly caught up in the obliging role she is acting for her captors, and is hence not really accountable for her feelings. The Dreamer deserves *his* sensations because he is the only one for whom Sharon is idea, not flesh, and while we are not to be thinking of Genet's views of flesh and idea, we are to credit the dreamer for his kindliness. As least likely to succeed, a title he earns with bouts of impotence, the dreamer is sure to succeed, for the fairy tale wishing is also binding. That our dreamer enjoys his dream, and survives, alone, to live on after Sharon's rescue, is tribute not to wonder, but to the fairy tale imperative of the happy ending.

Except in this one scene, where the titillation *is* fine, although unconfronted by the participants, the rest of the book withdraws from the wonder all of the pages ostensibly converge upon. Instead, the book turns tail/tale, shrinks from open and deep experiencing, to sit itself not on surprise or sensation or discovery, but on the smug surface of social morality. What will have been Father's experience with the experience of Sharon, who is "beyond all females alive on earth?" More social stereotypes confirmed—the Mechanic is brutal, the Accountant, a milquetoast; sex is confirmed as magical, but other, alien, a thing but to dream of wistfully. So Home and Mother stand secure and unsullied, as is his role as Father, from which he is free to wonder further. Wallace invites us to have it both ways: there is nothing special about Sharon's muff, yet there is; one can't perform such a deed safely, yet one can.

As in *The Cinderella Factor's* toying with the Beast and the exciting realities of sub-surface depths, Wallace titillates us with our culture's favorite story about life: "The civilized person everyone of us pretended to be, Malone saw, barely and thinly cloaked the real savage beast which each of us had been and could

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become once more." But how firmly trite morality and efficient social order copes with the beast. The unresolved tension in *The Fan Club* is between the private and dangerous wishing the Hollywood system encourages in its peasants (the taste of the real exotic), and the fairy tale moral order of popular and Hollywood design (formula types of popular myth). Hence the dishonest magic attributed to the muff.

Thus far the real world has been severely stylized, divided radically by the unresolved claims of surface and depth, self and society. We have seen the ostensible mimesis collapses into miniature models as comfortable as furniture in a doll's house. Yet, there must be something to these big novels, perhaps it is sensation. In fairy tales we know very clearly not to expect texture and sensation: we do not pass Cinderella's silken tresses between thumb and finger, nor trace the path of that tear of joy sliding down her rosy cheek, hovering over that cute little mole, just as she draws hankie from sleeve to blot it from our gaze. The swift, entirely incident-constructed plot of the tale prohibits such sights, and characters stay but nominal receptacles, chiefly hollow. The details we might want to savor here, to taste, touch and feel, should be the province, indeed the very virtue, of lengthy fiction, like popular novels, which enjoy the leisure and space to create moments of sensuous perception. Perhaps we can wallow in the lush beauty packaged by Tori and Wallace: the delicately arched eyebrows of the new Princess, the sweet itch of Sharon Fields' nether hair—magnificent and precise specifics? But no, not even here, for these tales too consist of nominal characterizations, incident racing after incident, patly framed reflection, and much empty space yawning between the events where the pleasing textures might have been. The space seems even hollower, for from "realistic" books we have come to expect that occasional underarm stain to darken blouse and confound wearer. We can sit with characters in chic and sexy cocktail lounges, but we will never know what it looks and sounds like to be sitting there. Why? Because the characters sitting there just sit there, noting nothing, not even thinking out loud, as we might—thinking warmly, here I am in this chic and sexy setting! There can be no lively perception simply because the characters in popular novels have such little consciousness—they so seldom perceive, muse, or reflect upon where they are and what they are doing. Rather, they tend to freeze into the objects around them, they become their bare speech and terse actions; rarely, as we do, do they experience each moment as that gap between memory and anticipation.

The kind of "experience" I am assuming to be the trait of quality fiction arises from the interplay between mind and matter. In bemoaning the absence of any kind of sensuous perception here I am really pointing out the absence of an active consciousness, a mental presence in the scene or hovering above it.

Let me illustrate with parallel scenes from two levels of fiction. In both a young man, the sensitive sort, confronts in the flesh the girl of his dreams, and becomes sexually excited in viewing her. The drama in the moment is obvious. Here is how Sharon Fields is presented in her very first appearance before the eyes of "the Dreamer," our "writer" who conceived of this kidnapping that becomes a rape:

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> From the open driver's window, Malone gazed at Sharon Fields, only a few feet away, almost near enough to touch. Her curious eyes shrouded by the sunglasses, the lovely nose and red lips, the roundness of the full breasts accentuated by the tight, knit shirt, the 'realness' of her person and flesh, left him momentarily speechless. He felt Shively jab him in the ribs, and he was brought to his senses.
>
> Desperately, he tried to behave in a normal manner. There she was, head thrown back, staring straight at his bearded face. (p. 164)

It would be unfair to pair Wallace with Hemingway or Bellow, so I have selected a passage from a "good" novel that happened to sell rather well, Dan Wakefield's *Going All the Way* (1970). Here our hero Sonny meets his blind date:

> To Sonny's astonishment and terror, she was a goddamn dream. Maybe not everybody's dream, but Sonny's. She was tiny and dark, with glossy black hair and big greenish-grey eyes and perfect white teeth circled by a lush little mouth with lipstick that was deep dark red. She had on a plain gold sleeveless dress with an emerald pin that looked like a bug, crawling up her tit. She wore white heels and sleek, seamless nylons. Sonny loved to see women in stockings, but it depressed the hell out of him when they had the seams crooked or were loose and all wrinkled up around the ankles. That ruined everything. But Gail's were just right, glistening tight against her legs, like a shiny second skin that could be peeled off. (p. 254)

Clearly, we see, feel, and enjoy more in Sonny's meeting. Sonny is drinking in everything he can of Gail, while Adam Malone seems to be staring into Sharon's sunglasses, behind which he can somehow make out her eyes to note they are "curious." Sharon's breasts are "accentuated," that glossy term of the *Family Circle* diction marking throughout the narrator's voice (gas tanks are "replenished," living rooms are "spacious," cheap is "inexpensive," and rest is "respite"). Gail's breasts too are accentuated, for Wakefield and Gail have placed the pin conspicuously on one of them. Moreover, we can assume them attractive, and we don't need the pornographer's cliche: "round," "full." Both Gail and Sharon have red lips, true, but we know Gail has spent time making herself look "lush," while Sharon's red lips come as basic equipment in prepackaged constructs like sex-symbols. The greater life in Wakefield's description is not simply the result of more details, greater length, and obviously superior writing ability. We must see the difference in what interests each writer. Wallace wishes to give us a formula of a symbolic type. Hence the language is neither sensuous nor vivid. It is abstract. Wakefield by contrast displays a plausible individual, in Gail, but it is she who assiduously cultivates that resemblance to a type. She is presented to another individual, Sonny, who dreams of that type. The details exist and function for us in Wakefield's passage precisely because there is a consciousness in the scene negotiating the delicious tension between type and actuality. Thus it is Wallace can rest with a hopeless "the 'realness' of her person and flesh," the abstract idea of her actuality. Sonny's instantaneous reverie on nylon stockings gives us all the actuality we need, and, moreover, communicates his excitement well enough that no one need "jab him in the ribs" to tell us he is transported into mental scenes of ecstasy. Sonny is located precisely in the gap between "memory" (his ideal of nylons) and "anticipation."

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One reason Sonny "lives" so fully in *Going All the Way* is his comic attempt to bridge this interval between adolescent expectancies (type) and adult reality (the ceaseless comedy between type and individual instance). The heart of Sonny's problem we see in this passage—he has read too many popular novels with their abstract models of experience. When he makes his advances and Gail accepts them, he proves to be incapable—an ironic consequence of his reading and absorbing models of popular reality.

Going All the Way is a *bildungsroman*, and Sonny is learning how to unlearn his desires to become a male in the mold of Frank Quinn. But Sonny cannot stop thinking about his frustrated attempts to become the smooth, unreflecting male whose every desire is directly and easily transformed into action, whose being is so satisfying for its lack of the specification and individuation that arise from consciousness. To give Frank Quinn a quirky bounce to his stride or the odd thought, is to fill in his hollow space, removing him several steps from his fairy tale prototype as type. He would be "that macho who walks like a kangaroo," or "that tough cop with an elbow fetish." Like physical detail, thoughts and perception tend to cripple with specification our heroes and heroines. The ideal popular protagonist, like Frank Quinn and Sharon Fields, is impervious to all the experience surrounding him. If he has psychic wounds, they are well covered by thick scar tissue. Every popular film has a role designed for such types (Steve Austin, the bionic man, is the type with its rationale made obvious) and it is the type—not the human semblance exemplifying it—that we care for, precisely because the type gazes unflinchingly into threats that give us sleepless nights. And because the protagonist stands above his own experience, so too must we, the readers. In effect, there is room aplenty for texture and sensuous or vivid scenes in the big popular novel, but no place whatsoever for this in its rhetorical design. These accounts of experience must not unsettle us, especially by dealing in familiar and concrete perceptions that might touch the life we actually live. In his lengthy analysis of the by now famous Sunkist magazine ad, Spitzer speaks of its "play language . . . which is satisfied with feigning gratuitously an ideal *word-world in empty space*" (mine).[1] In effect the world of these larger novels is built of words that remain just words, that do not stimulate perceptions that would otherwise structure the empty space in those interiors. The model of the mimesis is precisely that of the tale in which beauty is stylized, a chair a chair, a sexy man a beast, and lips that are simply red. For Wallace and Tori the world comes pre-formulated: if you missed it in the *New Yorker* ads and movies, or prior novels, too bad. Nor, more importantly, does our relaxed mind want it otherwise, for into the emptiness of this world we can more easily insert the idea of our self.

The trouble is that the reader's self is encouraged while reading to become as drained of specificity, as empty and unrealized as the hollow forms he identifies with. Thus the real and consummate pleasure in popular fiction is not experiencing experience—it is the opposite, absorbing impervious forms and hollow spaces. Imaginative possibilities, gestures toward gigantic scale, prove less expansive

[1]Leo Spitzer, "American Advertising Explained as Popular Art," in *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. Anna Hatcher (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 266.

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than the mental traveling we perform in Gregor Samsa's tiny apartment. We are to salute the imperatives of social myth to cancel out the indeterminancy of private experience. We grapple with ideal words and formulaic frames to spare us the chanciness of textures. The experience these books frame is small, official, and abstract. It neither conjures the world beyond the window nor tests the viewer. Its window to the world is painted over in caricatures.

Let us return to our readers, at Saturday morning breakfast. In each reader's head is the illusion that last night's reading brought an experience that transcends the mundane realities of bacon smells and the toast crumbs on the table cloth. Yet, had they experienced anything, their world might look somehow different: crumbs might be crumbier, smiles smilier, and the ghostly mental cliches and social conventions hovering about them might be more palpable. Instead, mumbling morning pleasantries, Cissy, Sam, Mother, and Father remain tucked into an enduring mental drowsiness.

But what about Marvin, our adolescent, nearly ready to grow up by walking out real doors into the world? Well past the appeal of tales, currently interested in the extrapolated reality of S.F., Marvin gives meaning to the need to correlate levels of fiction to the developmental model of maturation. He is at that stage where he requires advance pictures of the world he is about to enter. He will probably find them where most of us do—in the attractively taboo models of adult novels (*Peyton Place*, *The Betsy*, and *Jaws*), in the popular reality of popular novels. Perhaps we are not to worry. Most of us survive adolescence, some by writing novels about it. We all, moreover, require doses of fictional sedatives, demand the security of social myth, and must first learn simple versions of experience in order to unlearn them later, when complexity takes hold. Too, we are often reassured by social scientists that there is no proof popular fiction does any damage. Yet, anxieties persist, for reassurances like this come from those looking for massive and public consequences on a short term basis, whereas we are concerned with the private experience over the length of a lifetime or longer, the whole distance between fairy tale and popular novel. A more pointed concern, albeit undemonstrable, is: how do we know we have survived adolescence?

* * *

This essay was conceived as a feeble initial effort toward describing what is good about good fiction. It seemed logical, and easier, to begin by asking the inverse question. I have tried to treat both problems within the framework of experience, the vicarious reading experience, with an eye to implying the post-reading experience. Throughout I have assumed that the rhetoric of fiction, its consequences, is connected to the quality of mimesis. The workings of "models" is a major link, for we know models to be *descriptive*, *behavioral*, *aesthetic*, and *cognitive* patterns. That is, we know there can be no exact mimesis: Strindberg, Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner each propose their own models of experience, and each has its own truth, each somehow reflects a portion of what we term "real life," if only by formulating models by which we perceive our experience. Models, too, we imitate in patterning our perceptions and fashioning our "self." So that when we speak of the relative superiority of Wakefield, say,

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over Wallace, as literary model (to appreciate or to imitate), quite clearly the mimetic and the behavioral issues pertain to the quality of the aesthetic structure, if only in terms of the cognitive content. How much is seen, how accurate, coherent, subtle, or precise the vision, has everything to do with learning. Thus, fictional models of the world function like windows (offering a version of what lies outside the door) and matter a great deal, because we are always walking out that door into what becomes our "experience."

But let me indicate the degree of my failure to compose these problems by listing questions that remain:

1. If all windows are painted over, how do we explain the varying degrees of compositional talent in the pictures, or the varying degrees of correspondence we sense between picture and the experience outside the door?
2. Can we proportion the relative frequency of moments when experience explains the painted construct versus the times the construct pre-arranges the experience? How can we ever know the actual mechanics of a moment?
3. Can we separate windows from doorways in aesthetic terms? In empirical terms?

Instead of proposing answers to these questions in a way that accounts for aesthetic and existential experience (first-rate fiction probably offers the most hope for these answers), let me borrow the conclusions Jerzy Kozinski reaches on the effects of reading on readers of pulp romances: "if in their vicarious lives they settle for the fraud implicit in these magazines, one can only speculate on the experience component in their actual lives."[2] Kozinski thinks it an instinct in man to avoid his own experience and implies that serious fiction helps us to find and confront our very selves. In the language of this discussion, to choose to escape to the world view of popular reality may be to risk losing one's self in that fiction.

[2]"Packaged Passion," *The American Scholar*, Spring 1973, p. 204. Kozinski's analysis of love stories seems an illustration of another novelist's curt dismissal of popular culture. "This muck cripples consciousness," William Gass angrily opines, in his essay," Even if, by All the Oxen in the World," *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 275. While there has been much discussion on the immediate consequences of bad art upon the culture (especially regarding television programming) there are few who are willing to accept wholesale Roland Barthes' thesis in *Mythologies*, that bad art is endemic in middle class culture, that a nation constantly inhabits a false and second-rate fiction. Moreover, it is hard to dispute the contention of Herbert J. Gans (in *Popular Culture and High Culture: an Anlaysis and Evaluation of Taste* [New York: Basic Books, 1975]) that the widespread harm of popular culture has yet to be documented. Nor will it ever be, and neither can we prove the good Gans sees in popular art, such as the way Soaps supposedly teach problem solving. There is a better chance to verify individual harm over long periods, but again, most of the evidence resides in fiction. We are left with the problems of the multi-directionality of model theory.

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